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The League of Nations and the Quest for an Assyrian Homeland

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In 1930, King George V of Great Britain and Faisal, King of Iraq, signed a treaty that went into effect upon Iraq's admission to the League of Nations. Iraq was admitted to the League on October 3rd, 1932. On that date, pursuant to the treaty between Great Britain and Iraq, Iraq's status as a British Mandate ended. Britain's legal -- not to say moral -- responsibility for the minorities in Iraq ceased. After the signing of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty was announced and the British Mandate was scheduled to end, the League of Nations began to receive reports of abuses and petitions for redress from the Assyrian community. The concern was that conditions for Assyrians in Iraq would worsen once Britain turned authority over to the Iraqis. This might be the last chance to create a homeland for Assyrians or otherwise provide for their protection. The Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930 was completely silent on the protection of minorities. The Iraqi Constitution did include language requiring "the protection of minorities," and the Iraqi government insisted it would abide by that exhortation. History records, of course, that it did not.

The Five Assyrian Petitions

In 1931 and 1932, the League of Nations received at least five petitions from Assyrian groups.¹ The timing of the petitions and the imminent termination of the British Mandate in Iraq presented a fundamental problem to the League of Nations. Because the British Mandate was subject to the League of Nations, a successful petition could result in a resolution of the Council of the League of Nations directing Britain to take some action with respect to the Assyrian minority. But once the British Mandate in Iraq ended, the petitions to the League became moot. The League had no authority to order the Iraqi government to do anything with respect to its minorities. On September 24th, 1932, the Council of the League of Nations directed the Mandates Commission to review the petitions and the related documents, including responses by the British and Iraqi governments. The Mandates Commission produced a report that noted that British Mandatory authority in Iraq had terminated. The report to the Council of December 3rd, 1932, two months after Britain's mandatory authority ended, described this predicament, noting "the delicate nature of [the Mandates Commission's] task from the constitutional point of view." Nothing could be done, even if the Council was inclined to do something, and the petitions were formally rejected.

The first two petitions were dated October 20th and 23rd, 1931. These came from representatives of Assyrians in Iraq including Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, the Patriarch of the Church of the East. They requested that the Assyrians in Iraq be transported to land under the rule of one of the Western nations or, failing that, to Syria, which was still a French Mandate. Neither Britain nor Iraq objected to this idea, but no country volunteered to take the Assyrians. Britain argued that creation of a homeland was unnecessary because once Assyrians abandoned their quest for an autonomous homeland; they would become an integrated and "useful" part of Iraq. Later, the idea of transporting the Assyrians to a new territory would be explored more seriously (see below).

The third petition sought the recognition of Assyrians as a millet (nation) within Iraq and the creation of an Assyrian region within Iraq by redrawing Iraq's border with Turkey to include within Iraq the Turkish regions that Assyrian refugees in Iraq had lived in prior to their expulsion from Turkey. Failing this, the petition requested a special homeland within the existing borders of Iraq, made up of the whole of the district of Amedia plus adjacent parts of Zakho, Dohuk and Aqra, for the Assyrian refugees from Turkey then in Iraq. The petition specified that the Iraqi government recognize Mar Shimun's temporal and ecclesiastical authority over the millet. Because Mar Shimun's authority extended over the adherents of the Church of the East, the record is not explicit as to whether the intention was to give Mar Shimun authority over Assyrians of other denominations or whether the petition for recognition of rights and for a homeland only applied to Assyrians who were members of his Church. The Iraqi government exploited this confusion: Nuri al Said, the Iraqi Prime Minister, when it was convenient to do so, interpreted "Assyrians" to mean only members of the Church of the East. This allowed him to argue that the relevant petitions significantly exaggerated the numbers of Assyrians. Later analyses, including those on which the policies of the U.S. government were based, seem to have fallen into this trap.

The petition also requested that Mar Shimun be given the right to appoint a deputy to the Iraqi parliament. Iraqi law already provided for two Christian deputies to parliament to be elected by the Mosul Liwa. Nuri al Said's argument against the proposal for an additional deputy is instructive: Iraqi law specified one deputy for every 20,000 males; there were 73,000 Christians in Mosul, or, al Said concluded, about 36,500 males, so two deputies was, he argued, more than sufficient: "On this basis the Christians of Mosul are already adequately represented. The Assyrians are not the only Christian sect in the Mosul Liwa; in fact they number about a quarter of the Christian population. There are also Chaldean, Armenian, Syrian Orthodox and Syrian Catholic Christians." When the Iraqis found it convenient to splinter a relatively large minority into separate groups with differing interests, it did so. Al Said claimed that "Assyrians" made up only one-quarter of the 73,000 Christians in Mosul, or about 18,000.

It is not clear whether these figures included Assyrian refugees from Turkey. In any event, because no census was taken between the end of the First World War and the termination of the Mandate, al Said's figures are at best guesses and therefore quite subjective. The British response to this petition was that the petition represented the views only of the Assyrians expelled from Turkey and not the indigenous Assyrians of Iraq. The United Kingdom was concerned that granting special recognition to the Assyrians would endanger the national unity of Iraq. It asserted that there was insufficient unoccupied land for an Assyrian

homeland within Iraq, but it agreed that the requested region of Turkey should be within Iraq. Turkey, of course, refused the proposed border and also refused to allow the Assyrians to return to their homes.

The fourth petition, dated September 21, 1932, was signed by 58 people claiming to represent 2,395 families. The British document introducing this petition mentions that it comes from Bishop Yawalaha of Barwar and Amedia who is the first on the list of signators. This petition objected to the third petition, arguing that Mar Shimun did not represent all Assyrians, and that the Assyrians, both refugees and indigenous, were grateful to the Iraqi government. In responding to or evaluating the petition, the British and the League, glided quickly from Nuri al Said's very narrow definition of Assyrians as members of the Church of the East to what must have been a much broader definition, perhaps broad enough to include all Syriac-speaking people in Iraq. Here it served the Iraqi's interests to view the Assyrian community as a whole and to take Assyrian opposition to special privileges for Mar Shimun as evidence of general Assyrian satisfaction with the government of Iraq and general dissatisfaction with Mar Shimun. Divide et impera. The final petition, dated September 22, 1932, is another from Mar Shimun. It alleges that the Assyrians have a right to claim their original homes or suitable substitutes from the United Kingdom, for whom the Assyrians fought in the First World War. It requests the return of the Hakkari province or resettlement along the lines sought in the third petition. The petition noted that the Assyrians had voted for Iraq in the plebiscite for the Mosul Liwa based on the League's 1925 recommendation that the Assyrians be given local autonomy. Suppression of Assyrian Ethnic Identity

On the whole, the view of the British government dismissed the ethnic differences between the Assyrians and the Kurds, preferring to view the Assyrians instead as simply a Christian minority that needed to drop its demands for a homeland and become a part of the Iraqi polity. Sir Frances Humphreys, the British High Commissioner for Iraq at the end of the Mandatory period wrote: Too much importance should not be attached to local sectarian dissensions, the explanation for which was often to be found in some purely trivial matter or incident... reports [i.e., of potential threats to the Assyrian community] can only serve to excite religious animosities, to estrange the Iraqi government, and to unsettle the Assyrians themselves, whose hopes of future welfare depend upon their being merged into the body politic of Iraq, being accepted as loyal subjects of King Faisal, and living in peace with their neighbors... Not everyone shared this view, of course. In commenting on the Iraq Treaty to the Grotius Society in 1931, S. G. Vesey-FitzGerald, the noted authority on international and Islamic law, wrote that once the treaty with Iraq becomes effective and the Mandate concluded "[w]e shall cease to be responsible to the League of Nations. But shall we cease to be responsible to our own consciences?" In July of 1933, about 800 men left their families in Iraq for Syria, believing that the French would provide the land the Iraqis and the British had failed to provide. They planned to send for their families once they were settled. They crossed into Syria on July 22, but the French ordered them to return to Iraq. When they crossed back into Iraq, they clashed with detachments of the Iraqi Army. Many were killed; about 500 returned to Syria, where French authorities arrested them. The French eventually allowed these Assyrians to live in Khabur, where they became self-sufficient agricultural community. The following month, on August 11, 1933, Iraqis massacred the Assyrians of Semele. Perhaps 1500 Assyrians, mostly women and children, survived. These the government of Iraq sent to a camp in Mosul. The League recognized it had made a mistake and decided to provide a new home for Assyrians "who wished to leave or were unable peaceably to be incorporated into the Iraqi State." A commission was appointed to address the problem. It considered relocating Assyrians to Parana, Brazil; British Guiana; or Syria. Parana became impossible when Brazil passed a law limiting immigration. British Guiana was deemed unsuitable for a large-scale relocation. That left Syria. By this time more Assyrians had joined the 500 refugees in Khabur. The Turks and the Iraqis opposed a permanent settlement in Khabur, however, because it was too close to the Turkish and Iraqi borders. Eventually the French authorities in Syria agreed to allow a permanent Assyrian settlement in Ghab. Assyrians in Khabur would be relocated to Ghab and any Assyrians in Iraq who wanted to move to Ghab would be permitted to do so. Their neighbors would be other Christians and their government would be administered in part by a French governor.

The Collapse of the Ghab Solution

Twenty-four thousand Assyrians in Mosul agreed to go to Ghab; another eight thousand in Mosul expressed interest. Assyrians in Baghdad and Kirkuk also wanted to go. The large numbers involved make clear that the Assyrians planning to move to Ghab were not just Assyrian refugees from Turkey, and not just members of the Church of the East, but must have been Assyrians of all denominations. In 1935, the League reported that it was prepared to transfer Assyrians from Iraq who wanted to leave and that it had the funds to proceed with the plan. But in April of 1935, France announced it would apply to terminate the French Mandate in Syria. In the absence of French mandatory authority in Syria, the plan for the settlement in Ghab was doomed.

Syrian Arab resentment of the introduction of another Christian minority led to opposition to the plan within Syria: no Syrian government would support the settlement of Assyrians in Ghab. On July 4, 1936, the League approved the recommendation made by its committee for the resettlement of the Assyrians that the plan to settle Assyrians in Ghab be abandoned. The Khabur settlement became permanent, but it could not support the tens of thousands of Assyrians that had planned to go to Ghab. Khabur offered little security because Kurds and Bedouins regularly raided the settlement. 3rd The League urged the Assyrians in Iraq to become "incorporated in the Iraqi population as ordinary citizens of the Iraqi State." Soon the League was consumed with the looming disaster in Europe, and the League itself quickly became irrelevant.